Military service rare on delegation

Tristaters match trend throughout House and Senate

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WASHINGTON — Greater Cincinnati's congressional delegation soon will have to make one of the most momentous decisions any elected official can make: whether to go to war.

But like most of their fellow members of Congress, the 11 men who represent the Tristate never have seen war up close. None saw combat; only two are veterans: Sen. Richard Lugar, R-Ind., and Rep. Ken Lucas, D-Ky.

"Our job as legislators, whether we've served or not, is to do what's in the best interests of our country," said Rep. Rob Portman, R-Ohio, who turned 18 after the draft ended. "It's a tough decision to put young men and women in harm's way. It's the toughest decision you make."

Three decades ago, three of four members of Congress were veterans. Now only about a third of Congress' 533 members have military experience, according to statistics

Veterans: Fewer lawmakers have served in the armed forces

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from the American Legion and the Veterans of Foreign Wars.

The reason: Veterans of World War II and Korea, when service was essentially universal, have been replaced by men and women who came of age during Vietnam or after the end of the draft in 1973.

"The number of veterans has declined over the past several decades, which generally makes our job a little tougher when it comes to explaining many of our issues" like veterans' health care or beefing up the armed forces, American Legion spokesman Steven Thomas said.

Some Tristate lawmakers say they still are not sure how they would vote on a resolution, likely to come up in the next month, on using force against Iraq.

Some, like Mr. Portman, are ready to back military force but would prefer to see the United States go in as part of a multinational force. Others, like Rep. Steve Chabot, R-Ohio; Sen. Jim Bunning, R-Ky.; and Mr. Lucas, are ready to back military action, even if the United States has to go it alone.

Mr. Lucas' years in the Air Force and Air National Guard make him more supportive of going to war in Iraq, he said.

"When you've been involved with the military, I think you have more of a sensitivity to what's going on in military operations," the Democrat who represents Northern Kentucky said. "You've been around our war machine. You know how it operates. I guess I have a lot confidence in our ability to be successful."

Jim Rennegarbe, 72, a retired West Chester electrical contractor and Navy veteran who saw combat in Korea, said he would prefer the nation's leaders to have military experience.

"But if they had the right bringings-up from their fathers who probably served, it shouldn't make too much difference," he said.

Like Mr. Lucas, Mr. Rennegarbe's war experience hasn't made him any less supportive for a war in Iraq: That's the best way to prevent a major Iraq-backed attack, terrorist or otherwise, on the United States.

"To protect us, I'd rather fight the war over there than here," he said.

Life experience helps

Sen. Mike DeWine, R-Ohio, said his lack of military experience won't hamper his ability to decide on Iraq.

"I think all experiences are useful and helpful in life," he said.

Mr. DeWine got a student and then family deferment, and he never served in Vietnam. Mr. Bunning, who turned 18 in 1949, also got a student deferment and a family deferment.

Sen. George Voinovich, R-Ohio, tried to join the Judge Advocate General's Corps after completing law school but was turned away because of a childhood bone infection called osteomyelitis.

Sen. Mitch McConnell's lack of military experience surfaced recently during his campaign against Democratic challenger Lois Combs Weinberg. She charged that the Kentucky Republican received "preferential treatment" to avoid serving in Vietnam in the 1960s.

Mr. McConnell signed up for the Army Reserves in 1967 but got a medical discharge for optic neuritis, an eye condition that can cause blurred vision. The McConnell campaign denounced Weinberg's charges as a "slur" and an "act of desperation."

Two area congressmen, Mr. Chabot and Rep. Baron Hill, D-Ind., came of age at the end of mandatory conscription in 1973; both drew high draft numbers and were never called. Mr. Portman and Sen. Evan Bayh, D-Ind., were too young to even get draft numbers.

Rep. John Boehner, R-Ohio, signed up for the Navy, but after eight weeks of training was discharged, honorably, because of a bad back.

Mr. Boehner's very first vote when he came to Congress in 1991 was whether to go to war in the Persian Gulf.

"It was a very moving experience because guys who had been here 20 or 30 years were talking about this being the most difficult vote they ever cast," he said. "Members had to grapple with what was a big decision."

By coincidence, that was also the last vote Mr. Portman worked as a lobbyist for the first Bush White House.

"There were members who had served who felt strongly one way. Others who served who felt strongly the other way," he said. "I don't think military service ... puts you in one category."

Little Tristate influence

Aside from Mr. Lugar, a veteran and former chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, none of the delegation is a major player in the Iraq debate. Mr. Lugar has pushed for an international effort and a long-term commitment of troops to a post-Saddam Iraq to maintain stability.

Mr. Lugar, a former Navy intelligence briefer, is a player in part because military service confers credibility in debating war. Veterans like Sens. John McCain, R-Ariz., or John Kerry, D-Mass., are listened to more closely, said Charles Sanders, an Army veteran running for Congress in southern Ohio's 2nd Congressional District against Mr. Portman.

"My time in the military probably makes me more objective and broad-minded about when to use the military," said Mr. Sanders, a former mayor of Waynesville. "A lot of people have illusions about the military that it's a panacea, that it can solve all problems, and that's not true."

If the United States does go into Iraq, Mr. Sanders said, "don't dilly-dally there like we did in Vietnam. Pounce and get out. Anyone with a military background would probably agree with that."

But sharing military service does not mean shared views on war. An exhaustive study from a Pennsylvania State University professor and an Air Force second lieutenant found that whether a Congress member was a veteran had what they called a quite small effect on how they voted on military matters.

Party affiliation, sentiments of the district or personal beliefs were far more influential, according to professor William T. Bianco of Pennsylvania State University, co-author of a 1998 study called "The Decline of Military Experience in the Contemporary U.S. Congress."

"The members — even if they don't know which end of the gun has bullets coming out — they listen to the people who've been there," he said. "Which is what they do on every other issue."

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